

Interviewing Tips

The interview is a short, intense period of time that demands preparation.

Finding a job is a process that takes time, commitment, and a lot of practice. And interviewing is a significant part of the job search process. Success in the interview is directly related to the preparation that has been completed.

Conduct Research

Know Yourself

Most interviews boil down to a few questions: can you do the job? Will you enjoy it? Are you a good fit for our team/organization? In order to get to yes on those questions you need to know who you are and what you have to offer.

So. Who are you? To answer this question you'll need to take a thorough inventory of your life experiences. The information you collect about yourself will enable you to develop succinct and articulate answers to the questions you're likely to encounter in an interview.

Start by developing a good understanding of your education, experience, skills, interests, values, and abilities.

Try listing your characteristics under these headings:

- strongest skills
- greatest areas of knowledge
- best parts of your personality
- areas where you excel
- areas for growth

Want to delve deeper? Career and Employment Services (CES) has many resources to help you assess yourself: personal career advising, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the Strong Interest Inventory, and results from the Career Matchmaker in Career Cruising.

Which assessment tool is right for you? Visit CES to learn more. Once you have a good picture of who you are, we can also help you translate your characteristics and experiences into marketable skills.

Know the Organization

Find out everything you can about the organization. Know the organization's products, training programs, history, and current status. It's also helpful to familiarize yourself with industry-wide news and trends that might impact the organization.

How can you learn this information?

- Talk to people who work for the organization or who work in the same industry. (The ASK Network is an excellent resource for identifying Puget Sound alumni who work in various professions.)
- Conduct research online and in the library. (Visit CES for tips and tools to aid in your research of local, national, and international organizations.)
- Call the organization to request information—such as annual reports, brochures, and public relations materials that you don't find online.

Know the Position

Be knowledgeable about the key competencies required for the position. Ideally, you gather this information from the job description before you apply, and use it to write a targeted cover letter and resume.

Familiarity with the requirements of the position will allow you to highlight your particular strengths as they relate to the position. For example, if you know that one of your duties will be to give oral presentations, you can be sure to articulate your relevant experience and abilities in that area.

The research you conduct—about yourself, the organization, and the position—prepares you to identify and articulate how your goals and abilities would be an asset to the organization.

Practice

Practice is a vital component of preparing for the interview. How best to practice? You can write or type out your answers to potential interview questions. Or try recording your answers—whether audio or video, this allows you to play back the recording to critique your presentation style.

Mock interviews are designed to simulate an actual interview, and are a highly effective method of practice. Schedule a mock interview with a CES career advisor. During the session, you'll be asked some common interview questions and given feedback about your responses.

Here are a few to get you started:

Tell me about yourself.

Because it is so open-ended, this query is often the most anxiety provoking for interviewees. But if you're prepared, it provides you with a prime opportunity to showcase your relevant knowledge and skills.

Prepare a brief (60-90 second) response that highlights your education, your experience related to the position, and your interest in the position.

What experience do you have that prepares you for this position?

Express your past experiences and interests that directly relate to this job. Even if you have little practical experience, you can strengthen your qualifications by describing projects you've worked on for pertinent part-time or volunteer positions, related coursework, or leadership roles in co-curricular activities. End your response by emphasizing your enthusiasm for and interest in the position.

What strengths would you bring to the position?

Discuss your strength areas and demonstrate how these strengths will help you succeed in the position at the organization. Examples from your experience are effective ("I developed strong organizational skills in my position as an administrative assistant for the Student Development Office..."). Use every opportunity to show your skills and strengths through examples that verify or "prove" your assertions.

What is an area of weakness?

This can be a tricky question to answer. If you sit and ponder for several seconds and finally say, "I really can't think of anything," the interviewer will more than likely be amused or irritated. We all have weaknesses. In answering this question, don't discuss a weakness

that the interviewer might expect to hamper job performance. Instead, discuss a growth area for you—something that you have to work harder at or which can be overcome with time and practice.

Be honest, but make sure to talk about the steps you are taking to work on your weakness. For instance, if you tend to take on too many tasks, follow that up by indicating that you are working on that problem by learning when to delegate.

Why should we hire you for this position?

This is usually the final question asked. At this point, reiterate the points you have made throughout the interview and stress the strongest benefits you have to offer. Finish by stating how much you would appreciate the opportunity to work for the organization.

What questions do you have for us?

Demonstrate your interest in the organization

Be Prepared to Tell Stories

Because past performance is a good predictor of future performance, interviewers often use competency-based/behavioral questions to learn about your competencies through your experiences.

Expect to be asked questions that require you to recall situations you've been in, and describe in detail how you performed in those scenarios.

Anticipate the kinds of questions that might be asked.

The job description will give you a clear idea of the skills needed to do the job. Prepare several real-life examples that demonstrate skills and qualities they're asking for.

During the interview:

Listen carefully to each question and take a moment to organize your thoughts before responding. The questions may be long. Taking notes can be helpful.

If you're uncertain about what is being asked, rephrase the question and ask for clarification.

When you respond, be detailed and specific about your past accomplishments. Tell a good story.

Use a structure to keep from rambling. The S.T.A.R. method is the most common method:

S = describe the situation.

T = describe the task that was to be accomplished.

A = describe *your* actions to get the task accomplished (avoid using "we").

R = describe the positive result. When responding to a negative question, describe what you learned from the experience.

Sample behavioral questions to practice:

Decision Making and Problem Solving

- Tell me about a time when you had to keep from speaking or making a decision because you did not have enough information.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to be quick in coming to a decision.
- Tell me about the most difficult decision you've had to make in the last year.

Leadership

- Tell me about a time when you provided successful leadership or a sense of direction.
- What is the toughest group that you've had to get cooperation from?
- Have you ever had difficulty getting others to accept your ideas? What was your approach? Did it work?

Motivation

- Give me an example of a time when you went above and beyond the call of duty.
- Describe a situation when you were able to have a positive influence on the action of others.

Communication

- Tell me about a situation when you had to speak up (be assertive) in order to get a point across that was important to you.
- Have you ever had to "sell" an idea to your co-workers or a group? How did you go about it? Did they "buy" it?

Interpersonal Skills

- Tell me about a time when you functioned as part of a team and what your contribution was.
- Describe a recent unpopular decision you made and what the result was.

Planning and Organization

- How do you decide what gets top priority when scheduling your time?
- What do you do when your schedule is suddenly interrupted? Give an example.

Other Behavioral Questions

- Describe a time when you had to overcome stress.
- Describe a failure that occurred in your job and how you overcame it.
- Give a specific example of a policy you conformed to with which you did not agree.
- Give me an example of an important goal which you had set in the past and tell me about your success in reaching it.
- Describe an instance when you had to think on your feet to extricate yourself from a difficult situation.

Want More Interview Questions?

Books with additional interview questions are available at the CES Career Resource Library (Howarth 101) and provide tips about how to craft your responses.

Questions You Can Ask

You will nearly always be given an opportunity to ask questions at the end of the interview; always have several prepared.

Why ask questions?

First of all, asking questions conveys to the interviewer that you are intelligent, enthusiastic, and interested in the position.

Secondly, an interview is not only a time for the employer to evaluate what you can bring to the organization, it is an opportunity for *you* to gather information that will help you determine if this is a good fit for you.

Still, this is not the time to ask questions about salary and benefits, or the types of questions to which you could easily find the answers on the organization's website. Hold salary and benefit questions until after you receive an offer and you are negotiating the details.

Sample questions:

- How is this department organized? To whom would I report?
- Why is the position open?
- What are you looking for in the successful candidate?
- What kind of assignments/project would I be working on in this position?
- What are some of the greatest challenges I would face in this position?
- What do you like best/least about working here?
- What is the atmosphere like in the office?
- What type of training would I receive?
- What kind of professional development programs do you have?
- When do you plan to make the hiring decision?

Top 10 Skills Employers Want

Interviewers evaluate you against criteria that have been established for the position. These are not always as concrete as they might appear. Personal qualities and abilities you've honed during your time at Puget Sound as part of your liberal arts education—both inside and outside of the classroom—can be more important than specific skills.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers found that employers frequently seek the following traits in candidates:

Ability to work in a team structure: Because so many jobs involve collaborative effort, employers are looking for team players.

Ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside of the organization: Successful communication is essential in most organizations, so your ability to listen and speak effectively is key.

Ability to make decisions and solve problems: Employers expect employees to find solutions to problems by applying creativity, reasoning, and past experiences to a given situation.

Ability to obtain and process information: Research skills, critical thinking, and ability to synthesize information are valuable across many disciplines.

Ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work: Employers need team members who can implement projects and tasks within an allotted timeframe.

Ability to analyze quantitative data: The ability to read charts and make sense of data.

Proficiency with computer software programs: The ability to use and create documents with word processors, spreadsheets, and email are expected. If you're skilled with desktop publishing, presentation, and reporting programs, better yet.

Ability to create and/or edit written reports: While the style of writing used in the workplace will differ from the classroom, strong writing skills are useful in nearly every job.

Ability to persuade or influence others: Whether you're in a direct sales position or not, persuasive communication skills are a benefit.

Present your Best Self

When you take time to have a professional appearance, you give employers the impression that you will have a *professional attitude*.

Tight clothes, facial jewelry, and tattoos still aren't acceptable as part of a professional appearance. For most interview situations "dressing for success" means presenting a traditionally acceptable appearance.

Of course there are always exceptions. The key is to know what's acceptable for the organization—do your research. Does the organization have a dress code policy on their website? What image do they project to the public? Do you know people who work there who you could ask about appropriate interview attire? If you're still in doubt, choose to dress more formally than less.

"If you want to have eight earrings and have your tongue pierced, that's fine," says one recruiter. "But you're showing that you don't know how to play the game, or don't respect the process. What impression do you really want to make? If it's so important to you, go ahead and dress like you normally do, but realize that you may limit your options."

The Basics

Never confuse an interview with a social event. Don't dress for a party or a date.

Make sure your clothing fits well and provides adequate coverage: Too-tight, too-baggy, or too-revealing clothing doesn't present a polished image.

Think *noticeable*, not *distracting*. Avoid flashy jewelry or accessories that might cause an interviewer to think more about your appearance than your skills.

Ensure that the entire outfit—including shoes and accessories—is clean and free of tears, frays, or wrinkles.

Pay attention to the details:

- Choose a belt and shoes that match.
- If you're wearing a skirt, wear nylons or tights.
- Jewelry, watches, and other accessories are least likely to distract when they are small, simple, and kept to a minimum.
- Don't wear perfume or cologne; the scent can be distracting.
- Make sure your shoes are shined/clean, and appropriate to the situation. Closed-toe shoes only!
- Wear socks or stockings that match your outfit. No white gym socks!

Business Professional

Business professional is the most formal of workplace attire and is a safe bet for a job interview in most industries.

A simple, well-fitting suit in traditional colors (charcoal, navy, or black) will give you the most flexibility and the longest wear. A suit can be an expensive investment, but it can last several years and be well worth the expense.

If you don't have a lot of money to spend, find a local tailor. A good tailor can make a less expensive suit fit just as well as an expensive one.

We recommend that you have at least two distinct outfits for interviewing, in case you have a second or third-round interview within the same week.

Interview Prep Checklist

- Research the organization and the job.
- Assess your skills, knowledge, and accomplishments.
- Practice communicating the value you bring.
 - Need: What does the employer need or want?
 - Action: How have I demonstrated this skill?
 - Benefit: What was the positive result?
- Prepare the questions you will ask.
- Select your interview attire.
- Rehearse your handshake and greeting.
- Obtain details about the interview in advance.
 - Who will conduct the interview?
 - How many interviews will there be?
 - How long should I plan for the interview?
 - Directions to the location and parking availability.
- Gather necessary materials.
 - 2-3 copies of your resume
 - 2-3 copies of your reference list
 - Paper/notepad
 - A nice-quality pen
 - Padfolio to keep your paperwork organized
 - Job application information:
 - Social security number
 - Name and address of educational institutions
 - Driver's license number
- Set extra alarms or have someone call you to ensure you get up and get going on time.

Tips for the Interview

1. Dress and behave professionally. Don't chew gum.
2. Be on time; arrive early, but go inside no more than 15 minutes early. (Assume that you're under observation from the moment you enter the property, even if you're only in the parking lot.)
3. Visit the restroom for a last check of your grooming.
4. Turn off your phone!
5. Offer a firm, confident handshake.
6. Be alert. Sit up straight.
7. Maintain appropriate eye contact.
8. Smile, relax, and be yourself.
9. Take notes about key points discussed during the interview so that you can refer to them later when you draft your follow up messages.
10. Speak distinctly, and be complete, but don't ramble.
11. Use specific examples to illustrate your answers.
12. Emphasize the positive aspects of your experience.
13. Express your enthusiasm and interest in the job. (Be specific about areas that seem particularly exciting.)
14. At the end, thank the interviewer for their time and ask when they will be making a decision.
15. Request a business card from each interviewer so you have the correct contact information for follow up.
16. Promptly send thank you messages (within 24 hours).

Following up...

Especially when the job market is so competitive, you should take every opportunity to make a positive impression and to fix yourself in your interviewers' minds.

Thank you messages are a simple way to do exactly that.

Recruiters regularly tell us about the value of the thank you message. "Thank you notes help candidates stand out and could place one candidate ahead of another in the selection process."

Send personalized thank you messages to each interviewer as soon after the interview as possible. The same day is not too soon.

Hand-written notes take the most care, and make the longest lasting impression. If speed is of the essence, consider sending an e-mail and following that with a hand-written note.

For tips on how to craft your message, refer to CES' guide on Cover Letters and Thank You Notes.

Accepting a Position

Congratulations! Your hard work and practice have paid off and you've received an offer.

Now you need to determine whether or not to actually accept it. Especially if you have more than one offer to choose from, you'll need to evaluate your options.

Ask the caller if you can give them your answer within two or three days and then allow yourself to fully consider the offer.

Ask yourself the following questions before you accept:

- Is the organization's vision consistent with your own?
- Does it seem like an organization you could work for?
- Are you comfortable with what the position would require of you?
- Are the salary and benefits agreeable to you?

Do you still have questions? Don't be afraid to contact the organization with follow-up questions—it will be better for everyone if you resolve any concerns you have *before* you accept the position.

It can be detrimental to your reputation in the professional community (and it's a surprisingly small world) to accept one offer, continue interviewing with other firms and then accept a different offer, abandoning the initial organization. So before you say yes, think it through.

Once you have accepted an offer, notify any other companies with which you have been dealing that you are removing yourself from consideration.

CES is here for you!

Here are some of the resources CES can offer as you navigate your interview process:

- One-on-one meetings with a career advisor to help you identify and articulate your strengths.
- Tips, tools, and exclusive resources on Cascade to aid in your research of organizations and industries.
- Books filled with interview questions for you to anticipate and practice answering.
- Mock interviews to help you become comfortable with the interview process.
- Assistance honing your responses and developing questions you can ask the interviewer.
- Feedback on your chosen interview attire.
- Advice on how to write an effective thank-you message.
- Guidance as you evaluate offers.
- Moral support throughout the process!